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AUKUS Defense Ministers' Joint Statement

April 8, 2024

The Honourable Richard Marles MP, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Australia; the Right Honourable Grant Shapps, Secretary of State for Defence, United Kingdom; and the Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III, Secretary of Defense, United States.

Just over a year ago, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States announced the Optimal Pathway to deliver conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) to Australia — the first major initiative of AUKUS. Today, we take stock of the progress our nations have made, both to deliver this capability and to deepen our work on other advanced capabilities.

Our three countries seek to maximize the strategic benefits of the AUKUS partnership to support security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. Australia's acquisition of a conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarine capability is a necessary response to the rapidly evolving strategic environment. Strengthening our trilateral defense capabilities and our industrial capacity will enable AUKUS partners to deter coercion or aggression in the region more effectively.

The Deputy Prime Minister and Secretaries remain strongly committed to continued implementation of the ambitious plan set out in the Optimal Pathway for Australia's acquisition of conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines. Maintaining steady delivery of this plan will enhance the collective ability of AUKUS partners to promote stability and security in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

All AUKUS nations have reaffirmed their commitment to take full advantage of the technological opportunities of AUKUS by combining national strengths to deepen collaboration and deliver game-changing capabilities at pace. The AUKUS nations have bolstered efforts to break down barriers to collaboration, spur a more integrated defense industrial base and private sector partnership, and identify new opportunities for trilateral capability development.

The Deputy Prime Minister and Secretaries endorse the following announcements and initiatives across Pillar I and Pillar II.

PILLAR I – CONVENTIONALLY ARMED, NUCLEAR-POWERED SUBMARINES

Significant, tangible steps to implement the Optimal Pathway have occurred in all three nations in the past year. AUKUS partners remain committed to progressing Australia's acquisition of conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines in a way that sets the highest non-proliferation standards.

Leveraging the power of defense industry

AUKUS partners note the significant milestone for trilateral submarine cooperation provided by the important industry announcements of March 22, 2024, including Australia's selection of ASC Pty Ltd and BAE Systems to build its SSN-AUKUS submarines, and its selection of ASC as Australia's nuclear-

powered submarine sustainment partner. These strategic partnerships with industry will leverage respective knowledge, skills, and capabilities across AUKUS nations and will form the foundation for Australia's new nuclear-powered submarine production and maintenance activities.

Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States are making significant investments in their respective submarine industrial bases, which will ensure the supply chains of all three nations are more resilient, integrated, and productive. This will generate economic growth in defense and national security sectors in all three countries. These partnerships will pave the way for further opportunities for industry to expand and strengthen trilateral supply chains, supporting a sovereign sustainment and build capability in Australia.

Establishing Submarine Rotational Force-West

Building on the success of earlier SSN visits to Australia since the Optimal Pathway announcement, AUKUS partners welcomed a visit by USS Annapolis to HMAS Stirling in March 2024. This latest visit is part of a trilateral commitment to more frequent SSN visits to HMAS Stirling under the Optimal Pathway. This, and future such visits from UK and U.S. SSNs, will contribute to building Australia's capacity to support a rotational presence of UK and U.S. SSNs under Submarine Rotational Force-West (SRF-West) from as early as 2027, and Australia's future sovereign SSN capability.

The most significant maintenance activity to be conducted on an SSN in Australia, to date, is scheduled to occur in the second half of 2024. The maintenance activity, supported by a Submarine Tender, will be critical to building Australia's ability to safely and securely sustain U.S. SSNs in preparation for the establishment of SRF-West. In anticipation of this forthcoming activity, 37 Royal Australian Navy sailors reported to the USS Emory S. Land in Guam in late January 2024, to begin training and to gain the necessary skills and qualifications. Australian industry personnel will also be involved in supporting this activity to continue to grow the submarine sustainment workforce and supply chain. UK Royal Navy officers will observe the activity to enable integration of UK maintenance requirements for future UK SSN port visits and future UK rotational presence as part of SRF-West. This will be the first time that Australian personnel will actively participate in the maintenance of a U.S. SSN in Australia, enabled by the provisions in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024.

Important steps have been taken towards delivering a sovereign conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarine training capability for Australia. In December 2023, the United States and Australia finalised a Foreign Military Sales (FMS) case to procure submarine training devices to support the establishment of SRF-West. As part of the FMS case, the first contracts were awarded this month by the United States for submarine training simulators. These will be used to train Royal Australian Navy personnel on the Virginia class platform in advance of Australia operating its own sovereign Virginia class SSNs, and supporting visiting and rotational U.S. Virginia class SSNs through SRF-West. The FMS case will also enable the training of Australian Defence and industry personnel in the United States. In March 2024, a cohort of 20 Australian industry personnel completed a successful three-month placement at Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard and Intermediate Maintenance Facility.

Enabling legislative and policy change

AUKUS partners welcomed the passage of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 by the U.S. Congress in December 2023. This was essential for implementation of the Optimal Pathway, including through the U.S. Congress' AUKUS Submarine Transfer Authorization Act regarding the sale of Virginia class SSNs to Australia, and enabling critical workforce development activities. A further legislative milestone was achieved through the introduction of nuclear safety legislation – the Australian Naval Nuclear Power Safety Bill 2023 and Australian Naval Nuclear Power Safety (Transitional Provisions) Bill 2023 – to the Australian Parliament in November 2023. Once passed by the Australian Parliament, this legislation will establish the nuclear safety framework for Australia's nuclear-powered submarine enterprise.

Accelerating workforce growth

Progress has been made to implement the education and training initiatives announced by AUKUS Defense Ministers in December 2023, supporting workforce development for Australia's nuclear-powered submarine enterprise. Australians are undertaking placements in the United Kingdom and United States throughout 2024 to build Australia's industrial workforce. These placements will be undertaken in accordance with AUKUS partners' respective obligations and commitments under international and domestic law, including with respect to nuclear non-proliferation. Later this year, ASC employees will commence placements at Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard to develop the skills necessary to sustain Virginia class SSNs. They will be the first Australian civilian industry personnel to train in the United States following the passage of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024.

More than 20 Royal Australian Navy sailors and officers are currently in the U.S. Navy Submarine Training system. The first three Royal Australian Navy submarine officers completed the U.S. naval nuclear power training pipeline and are on track to graduate from the Submarine Officer Basic Course in Groton, Connecticut later this month. They will report to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in June to serve on U.S. Virginia class SSNs while completing further qualifications. Over the next 12 months, these numbers will increase to more than 100 Royal Australian Navy personnel in training across the United States, including serving at sea on U.S. Virginia class SSNs. These training opportunities are critical to ensure Australia is ready to operate its sovereign Virginia class SSNs from the early 2030s. In the United Kingdom, three Royal Australian Navy officers have completed initial nuclear power training at HMS Sultan. They will undertake further engineering courses and are on track to graduate from the UK Nuclear Reactor course in July this year, before commencing practical qualification within the Royal Navy Submarine Arm. These officers will be deployed on a UK Astute class SSN.

Australia and the United Kingdom, and Australia and the United States, have signed bilateral Memoranda of Understanding for personnel exchanges to help accelerate growth of Australia's sovereign workforce.

PILLAR II – ADVANCED CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT

Advancing commitments from December 2023, AUKUS partners highlighted efforts under Pillar II to bolster industry and innovation sector collaboration. Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States are pooling the talents of our defense sectors to catalyze, at an unprecedented pace, the delivery of advanced capabilities. Partners are working with investors, private capital, and traditional and non-traditional industry to translate disruptive technology into asymmetric capability for our three defense forces.

Progress on the AUKUS Defense Ministers' commitments into the AUKUS Advanced Capabilities endeavour is continuing. Although much of this activity remains classified, AUKUS partners are making strides towards jointly realizing greater maritime awareness through networked autonomy, decision advantage, and enhanced strike.

Private sector financing

AUKUS partners welcomed the first meeting of the Defense Investors Network on February 28, 2024. Pillar II is embracing innovative finance and investment as key enablers for advanced capability development. Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States look forward to engaging with the Defense Investors Network and similarly focused groups on opportunities under Pillar II.

Aligning our systems

AUKUS partners are continuing to update laws and policies to enable effective implementation of AUKUS Pillar II. Partners are working through our respective National Armaments Directors towards better harmonization of our capability development and acquisition systems to support more seamless and agile cooperation. A National Armaments Directors' tabletop exercise in March tested our respective national processes in three scenarios against co-development, co-production, and co-sustainment.

Securing licence-free defense trade

AUKUS partners are making progress in aligning exports and trade regulations to drive deeper defense trade. Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States are taking significant and tangible steps to meet their commitment to streamline trade among and between the AUKUS partners. In December 2023, the U.S. Congress included in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 a pathway to a historic export control exemption to streamline the flow of defense trade for Australia and the United Kingdom. To complement this, on March 27, 2024, Australia passed the Defence Trade Controls Amendment Act 2024 that provides the reciprocal national exemption for the United States and the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom is progressing reform to its Open General Export License Program to provide reciprocal exemption for Australia and the United States. These collective mechanisms will enable most defense items to transfer or re-transfer between the three countries without needing further authorization. This environment will set the conditions for unparalleled levels of defense cooperation between AUKUS partners and enable the integration of our industrial bases to accelerate our technological advantage.

Strengthening links across our industrial bases

Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States acknowledged the launch of the AUKUS Advanced Capabilities Industry Forum, which will hold its first meeting on April 9, 2024. The Forum is the key interface between AUKUS governments and industrial bases, via our trade associations. It will focus on trilateral requirements, capability planning, development, and delivery of AUKUS Advanced Capabilities. The Industry Forum provides an opportunity for government and industry representatives to come together to exchange ideas and deepen industrial collaboration on advanced capabilities.

Innovation driven capability

AUKUS partners launched the inaugural Pillar II Innovation Challenge on electronic warfare on March 26, 2024, as a collaborative initiative between respective innovation accelerator units. This will be the first in a series of AUKUS innovation challenges that will identify opportunities to harness commercial technologies from all three nations to support advanced capability development under AUKUS.

Responding to operational demand

Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States welcomed the Land Commanders Statement of Intent to develop a land contribution to AUKUS Pillar II, the AUKUS Army Armaments Cooperation Forum, and the Combined Multi-Domain Task Force. All three countries affirmed their support for Land Commanders to pursue opportunities in Long Range Fires under AUKUS Pillar II in 2024.

Engaging close partners and allies

Since the inception of AUKUS, our nations have been clear in our intent to engage others in Pillar II projects as our work progresses. Over the past two and a half years, we have built a strong, trilateral foundation for delivering advanced military capabilities at speed and scale. AUKUS partners have developed principles and models for additional partner engagement in individual Pillar II projects and will undertake consultations in 2024 with prospective partners regarding areas where they can contribute to, and benefit from, this historic work.

In identifying collaboration opportunities, we will take into account factors such as technological innovation, financing, industrial strengths, ability to adequately protect sensitive data and information, and impact on promoting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Our objective remains to further the delivery of advanced military capabilities to our respective defense forces in support of regional stability and security; we are confident that engaging like-minded partners in the work of Pillar II will only strengthen this pursuit. Recognizing Japan's strengths and its close bilateral defense partnerships with all three countries, we are considering cooperation with Japan on AUKUS Pillar II advanced capability projects.

Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States are committed to continued openness and transparency with international partners on AUKUS. We look forward to continuing close collaboration to advance the generational potential of AUKUS. Through the activities of both Pillars, all three countries affirm their commitment to work jointly and together with the region to ensure a stable, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, complementing the existing regional architecture.

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